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SUBJECT: TWO DAY TRANSIT STRIKE PARALYZES BOGOTA

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) On May 2-3, associations representing Bogota,s private bus owners launched a surprise strike, effectively grounding approximately 95 percent of the city's private buses and stranding over 4 million residents. The striking owners demanded changes to the transition regime involving the city,s Transmilenio mass transit system. Some violence was associated with the strike, mainly against taxis and the few private buses that remained in operation, and massive traffic jams prompted the closing of public schools and many businesses. The strike was lifted after Bogota mayor Eduardo Garzon, yielding to political pressure from President Uribe, agreed to hold future talks with the trade associations. End Summary.

FULL SCALE BUS STRIKE SURPRISES CAPITAL

¶2. (U) The Bogota transit strike began in the early morning of May 2 and involved virtually all of the city's 25,000 private buses and microbuses, but not the Transmilenio rapid transit system. The Association of Small Private Bus Owners (APETRANS) organized the strike, but did not provide prior notification to municipal authorities. The larger trade associations representing a majority of private bus operators immediately supported the strike. (Note: The Transmilenio bus line is a rapid transit system of articulated buses serving main arteries in Bogota via dedicated highway lanes for exclusive use of Transmilenio buses.)

BUS OWNERS DEMAND THAT MAYOR REVISE MASS TRANSIT POLICY

¶3. (U) According to APETRANS, the grievances behind the strike were in reaction to Mayor Garzon's decisions to remove buses over 20 years old from circulation, enact an environmental regulation restricting the use of buses over 10 years old using diesel fuel, and eliminate over 150 routes for approximately 1,250 private buses in favor of new Transmilenio routes. The Mayor's Office asserted the strike was over compensation for bus owners to take obsolete buses out of circulation. City Hall pays up to USD 11,000 for each bus, but the bus owners have demanded no less than 15,000 USD. The Mayor's office added that bus owners had also been cheating the city for years by manipulating the quota system intended to limit the number of buses in circulation. They are also accused of buying substandard buses to force the city to repurchase them at USD 11,000 - 15,000.

EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE

14. (U) The unannounced strike caused havoc in the capital, including some small scale violence and large traffic jams that prompted the closing of most schools and some business. While taxis and privately owned cargo vehicles (such as pickups and stepvans) provided alternative means of transportation for some Bogota residents, many others were forced to walk, ride bicycles, or not report to work at all. Passengers waited hours in Transmilenio lines that snaked around entire blocks. Press reported the estimated economic impact of the strike to be over USD 5 million during the strike's 36 hours. However, according to city's environmental office, the absence of 25,000 buses from Bogota's roadways resulted in reducing air pollution by 28 percent.

----- PRESIDENT, TRANSPORTATION MINISTER INTERVENE, BUSES RETURN -----

15. (U) In the afternoon of May 3, the four major trade associations representing large private bus companies broke ranks with APETRANS and agreed to lift the strike after a meeting with the Minister of Transportation. According to press reports, President Uribe pressured Mayor Garzon to hold talks with the bus owners. APETRANS, the association representing small-scale bus owners and the original organizer behind the strike, quickly denounced the decision of the larger operators to lift the strike as "traitorous."

16. (U) With the strike lifted, the Mayor agreed to hold further talks and workshops, beginning May 16, to address the concerns of the bus owners. While the Mayor is reluctant to give into their demands, the owner associations reserved the right to resume the strike if their needs are not met. The Mayor has said, "Either I govern or get governed."

----- DRIVERS' UNIONS BACK OWNERS, CALL STRIKE "POORLY ORGANIZED" -----

17. (U) In the morning of May 3, the president of the National Driver's Union (SINDINALCH), which represents approximately 4,000 private bus drivers, accurately predicted that the strike would end by the next day. He explained that there was no strike fund and the drivers were unable to financially subsist without returning to work. He blamed APETRANS for "poorly organizing" the strike and not providing sufficient notification to any of the 15 unions representing bus drivers, although all the unions were supporting the strike. He said the strike would not achieve its objectives, but said, "At least people now know the Transmilenio isn't capable of handling all commuters." In spite of the fact that many of their members are bus riders, two of the three principal trade confederations, the General Confederation of Work (CGT) and the Confederation of Colombian Workers (CTC) supported the strike. The CGT and CTC represent 120,000 and 55,000 workers respectively. The United Confederation of Workers (CUT), Colombia's largest trade confederation with 550,000 workers, was divided in its position. On May 2, its president released an announcement calling for dialogue between City Hall and the bus owners, while supporting the efforts of Mayor Garzon, himself a former CUT president, in modernizing the Bogota transit system. The following day, the far left wing of the CUT leadership released a statement unconditionally supporting the strike.

Comment

18. (U) The overwhelming success of the Trasmilinenio system in reducing traffic and pollution in Bogota affords Mayor Garzon considerable public support in managing the private bus transition regime. While most Bogotanos appreciate the

concerns of private bus owners and drivers, the efficient mass transit genie has been let out of the bottle and the days of the old chaotic bus system are numbered. Bogotanos do not want to see another bus strike, however, and will look to Mayor Garzon to find some sort of solution that will keep the buses running and the transition to the Transmilenio on schedule. End Comment.

WOOD